

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AS THE BASIS FOR BUILDING MUTUAL RELATIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA. THE CASE OF POLAND AND AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

Knowledge of politics is the basic determinant of political civic competences. In the contemporary world, citizens do not know a lot about politics, which affects their decisions, e.g. when voting in elections. The acquisition of political knowledge shapes political thinking, based on a specific set of views, which make up the so-called mind map or mind model.

The aim of our research is to identify the influence of political knowledge on the quality of Polish-Azerbaijani relations. The study was carried out between October 2017 and March 2018 and is one of the outcomes of our research internship at Baku Slavic University.

The research shows that the respondents agree only on a few specific issues, such as trust in politicians or the importance of family in life, but demonstrate considerable differences when it comes to basic knowledge of their partner country and in their attitude to tradition or gender roles. Therefore, the incompatibility of answers in this sphere makes it very difficult to build good social and political relations between Azerbaijan and Poland.

Key words: *political knowledge, political competence, Poland, Azerbaijan*

INTRODUCTION – SOME REMARKS ON TERM COMPETENCES

The term competence comes from sociology and psychology. For psychologists, it means a specific skill which helps people interact with the people around them effectively [White 1959, as cited by: Plecka, Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2013]. Competences defined in this way refer to different spheres of our activity. Thus, we may distinguish a few levels of them: social, civic and political. Social competences involve both a psychological predisposition, such as personality traits, temperament, intelligence, etc., and socialization, which helps us acquire specific experience owing to living in a given society.

Civic competences are a part of social competences and are defined as “the skill of cooperating with other people for the sake of common good; they refer to the quality of interpersonal contacts” [Plecka, Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2013]. They enable participation, on the basis of knowledge from different areas, in civic life, and motivate the individual to get engaged in the activities for the good of the whole community. Apart from knowledge, civic competences are also determined by skills and abilities, such as critical thinking, inquisitiveness, being a good listener, cooperation and problem-solving skills [Plecka, Wojtasik, Turska-Kawa 2013]. Civic competences are very important, especially for the development of social resources and the socialization of individuals involved in the process.

Civic competences, however, refer not only to the community as the area of people’s activity, but also to one’s relations with the state as an organization and to being able to influence its political system [Marszałek-Kawa 2016]. It is safe to say that they constitute a higher degree of competence initiation, referred to as political civic competences. They cover knowledge of politics (dependent on one’s interest in politics), values (especially political ones), social trust (which bridges political civic competences), and, finally, action (largely determined by the above mentioned factors). It is them, as Elizabeth Theiss-Morse points out, that determine whether one of citizenship models will function in the society: passive citizen, citizen-elect, citizen-spokesman, and citizen-activist [Theiss-Morse 1993].

1. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

What is the basic determinant of political civic competences is knowledge of politics. In the contemporary world, citizens do not know a lot about politics, which affects their decisions, e.g. when voting in elections. It should be pointed out here that some researchers cast doubt on the relevance of this knowledge for political activity. They emphasize the individual character of citizens’ knowledge [Lalman, Oppenheimer, Świstak 1994]. This assumption is based on the idea of the absolute rationalism of individuals and the possibility of using it for the implementation of individual interests. Therefore, one’s knowledge – which determines the possibility of choice - only serves individuals themselves, not the whole society. It thus becomes part of the liberal rather than republican demands for action for the common good [Godlewski 2009; Rosanvallon 2011].

This concept is consistent with the theories of elitism, which, since as early as Plato’s times, have stressed that knowledge, including the knowledge of politics, is first of all necessary for people in power. In modern times, the concept of elitism

was developed by Joseph Schumpeter, who pointed out that participation does not have to refer to the whole society and that it does not have spreading capabilities. Knowledge of politics can be applied for building the common good only if those who are interested in politics have good knowledge of it. In that case, the minority makes decisions concerning the majority. Schumpeter stresses that the democratic regime should not be considered utopian any longer. Democracy is not simply the rule of the people, but the system in which citizens elect their representatives, who they should not disturb in exercising power [Schumpeter 2009].

This multitude of views concerning the knowledge of politics and its influence on the quality of political civic competences can also be supplemented with the criticism of rationality. As far as the 20th century concepts are concerned, we should quote Michael Oakeshott's theory. Criticizing the expert knowledge of politics, he distinguished between two kinds of thinking: practical and technical. The first type referred to knowledge from a number of areas, which helps to describe the successive stages of action leading to the accomplishment of the goal, such as how to build a house or hammer a peg in the wall [Oakeshott 1999]. The other kind of thinking, practical knowledge, was connected with a lot of spheres of life, in which, to make decisions, we make use of our experience or intuition, i.e. "the levels of initiation", which cannot be learnt from course books, but are a consequence of life choices. Thus, practical thinking is devoid of rationality that technical knowledge involves. This also refers to politics. As Marcin Król notes, "the art of politics cannot be learnt from a course book, but only thanks to experience and intuition, as well as through taking advantage of the moment, circumstances and opportunities" [Król 2015].

At present, there is a lot of criticism of rational thinking based on reliable knowledge. This is mainly related to the view that in the world which is becoming more and more complicated, citizens first of all need simplified visions (which contributes to the emergence and reinforcement of populism). That is why they will never be fully informed. As Agnieszka Turska-Kawa notes, "when the individual does not have the sufficient amount of information, they fill information gaps by making use of the available methods supporting the decision-making process" [Turska-Kawa 2015]. What is the most common tool is obviously a heuristic technique, i.e. simplified reasoning rules. One may also get carried away by emotions, which definitely contradict rational choice [Caplan 2017].

However, despite the criticism of rationalism and doubts concerning the knowledge of politics, it is an important element of the development of political civic competences. What should be the starting point for acquiring knowledge of politics is R. Dahl's statement that "everyone should have equal and real opportunities to be informed about all possible decisions and their likely consequences" [Dahl 1999]. It is assumed that knowledge of politics is a "set of facts stored in long-term memory" [Caprini, Keeter 1993]. Citizens acquire knowledge in order to become well-informed and, owing to this, participate in the life of the whole community. This mainly refers, as numerous studies confirm, to electoral participation, but also to building social relations and cooperation with other countries. It should be pointed out that knowledge of politics exists on different levels in different societies and communities, and is relatively stable in time. At the same time, "political

knowledge is fraught with consequences and develops a sense of having influence on politics” [Caprini, Keeter 1993].

Research shows that people’s political knowledge and its quality are determined by their social position, involving age, place of living, professional status and level of religiousness. These factors significantly affect the level of one’s knowledge of politics. They are also largely dependent on the sources of knowledge: mass media, both traditional and electronic ones. Citizens are usually insufficiently informed and rely mostly on their own experience. They usually have the so-called general competence, which allows them to produce quite conventional opinions, which are the basis for making easy decisions “with the least possible effort and low costs” [Godlewski 2009]. There is no doubt this is caused by the high costs of absorbing and storing political information and difficulties in acquiring and understanding this information [Bennet 1988].

It should also be added that we must distinguish between professional interest in politics resulting from one’s job, e.g. a politician or a political scientist, and understanding it by an ordinary citizen. What is more, the practical understanding of politics does not have to be superficial. It mainly depends on the degree of one’s interest: if a citizen accumulates, analyzes and constantly absorbs knowledge, they cannot be criticized for the lack of deep understanding of it. In turn, when one becomes occasionally interested in political affairs and does not seem to comprehend the complex nature of the world, their knowledge of politics becomes common and superficial and their interest in this matter may be based on digressions and impressions [Karwat 2012]. In this case, people focus on details, which are perceived without discerning any relations and determinants. The information that a citizen has lacks order and is simplistic. Mirosław Karwat compares this to a gossip type of curiosity. It focuses on scandals, rumours and sensations the perception of which is based on impressions and emotions (often speculations) rather than logical ordering. People with such knowledge of politics may be seen as competent, but they are not interested in politics defined as a set of programme alternatives or possible solutions to social problems. For them, politics involves things like personal animosities, the line-up of powers and popularity rankings [Karwat 2012].

Common knowledge is based on three basic components: imaginations, intuition and valuing judgments [Karwat 2012]. They significantly contribute to the conventional perception of reality, without analyzing the whole, to the simplification and detailed view of a vision (what somebody said, etc.). Thus, common knowledge is not conducive to the consolidation of democracy; it is quite the opposite. People who have common knowledge are more influenced by populist slogans: simple solutions to difficult situations. Their knowledge of politics is founded on a simple pattern: who stole – has to give it back; something is impossible – we “can do it”. Otherwise, even if, on the basis of common knowledge, a citizen tries to make rational decisions, their rationalism will still lose to a promise, since their knowledge is random rather than permanent.

Karwat compares this type of knowledge to the substantive knowledge of politics. It focuses on problems instead of marginal information concerning politics. Citizens are interested in institutions, political structures, and social and legal norms. They deal with social diagnoses, forecasts of the future, ideas for new solutions, and

judgments of other people's views [Karwat 2012]. Unfortunately, as empirical research shows, only about two or three per cent of citizens have the substantive knowledge of politics. The others, as Mikołaj Cześniak, Radosław Markowski and Agnieszka Kwiatkowska put it, should be classified in the categories of: „total ignoramus”, „paralyzing ignoramus”, „huge ignoramus” or just „ignoramus” [Cześniak, Markowski, Kwiatkowska 2016].

Elaborating on M. Karwat's deliberations, we may thus indicate four levels of interest in politics. On the first level, in line with the opinion of Markowski and his team, there is political ignorance. This refers to people uninterested in politics, who are usually too poorly educated to grasp political information. This group also includes those for whom politics is a waste of time and this is why they do not seek information connected with it. On the second level, there are people who use the abovementioned common knowledge – usually based on emotions, intuition and speculations. Their knowledge is unordered, chaotic and superficial. These two groups – of ignoramuses and “speculators” – significantly contribute to the development of populism and extremism. Their polar opposites are the substantive knowledge of politics and expert political knowledge. They are both marked by reflection and cause and effect thinking, which embraces the whole instead of just the details of phenomena. While the substantive knowledge of politics is to a large degree uncritical of the sources of information and rarely helps to formulate hypotheses, the expert knowledge is free of these deficiencies. Moreover, its qualities are perfectionism and a sense of dynamics, as well as seeking new sources and verification capability.

Therefore, it is up to a person how he or she gains knowledge of politics. Whether one is predisposed to moving from common knowledge (or even from political ignorance) to substantive (or expert) knowledge depends on a number of factors. The study conducted by the research team of SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities [Żerkowska-Balas, Cześniak, Zaremba 2017] reveals some regularity concerning the stability of Polish people's political knowledge – in the years 1997-2015 it was relatively constant, showing no systematic and permanent fluctuations. It was also confirmed that older, well-educated, wealthy residents of large cities have more knowledge about politics. The research provided evidence that people whose knowledge of politics is broader than just common know its mechanisms and do not limit themselves to observing political events [Żerkowska-Balas, Cześniak, Zaremba 2017]. This was confirmed by the study carried out by Radosław Markowski's team, who pointed at culture, especially reading, as one of the significant determinants of interest in political knowledge. According to the statistics of the National Library from 2015-2016, only 35 per cent of Poles read at least one page of printed text a year. It means that a considerable part of electors had not read the programmes of political parties before the parliamentary election of 2015.

This is a point of significant relevance as the acquisition of political knowledge shapes political thinking. It is based on a specific set of views, which make up the so-called mind map or mind model. It is founded on the formulation of diagnostic, explanatory, forecasting, valuing and normative judgments [Reykowski 2002]. Although political thinking and gaining political knowledge are individual actions, mind models established on the basis of them are made owing to joint efforts –

being a consequence of socialization and obtaining information from other people. People who lack a mind model are not able to think about politics independently and often make decisions on the spur of the moment, influenced by emotions, authoritative people or external pressures. They may be easily controlled since their thinking of politics is determined by chaos and randomness. They also become susceptible to populist slogans.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHOD

The aim of our study is to identify the influence of political knowledge on the quality of Polish-Azerbaijani relations. We selected an in-depth interview as the research method, because it seemed to us that a questionnaire was a set of too simplified responses [Modrzejewski 2011; 111-113]. An in-depth interview is usually chosen when specific phenomena, such as the relevance of political knowledge for building social and political relations, come into play. This is because it offers the possibility of asking respondents in order to seek explanations or deeper meanings, as well as creating the atmosphere for sincere answers.

The study was carried out between October 2017 and March 2018 and is one of the outcomes of our research internship at Baku Slavic University. The participants of the study were university students who spoke Polish, which was the consequence of their interest in Poland. We also conducted in-depth interviews with students from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, who study the same field and at the same level as their Azerbaijani colleagues at the same. There were 50 respondents, including 25 from Baku Slavic University and 25 from the Nicolaus Copernicus University; 30 women and 20 men. They were students of international relations at the age of 21-23.

The main research problem was the influence of political knowledge on the development of relations between the representatives of two societies and countries: Azerbaijan and Poland. That is why the interviews were designed in the way that can be referred to as cross-examining: we asked students from Poland about Azerbaijan, and interviewed students from Baku about Poland. These questions were preceded by preliminary general questions, which allowed us to build rapport with the interviewees.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

We asked three general questions to which we received interesting responses. The answer to the first of them, "Is family important for you?", was actually not surprising. 49 people declared that their family was very important, but they raised different arguments. They used statements such as "my family understands me perfectly," "because I love them a lot," "because there are no things more important in life." Two responses drew our attention. One of them, which confirmed that family is very important, was given by a student from Baku: "when the family is good, the society is good as well, and this means a good state." The other response that is worth emphasizing was given by a student from Poland, who was the only one that answered our question in an ambiguous way. She said: "It depends on whom". She justified her words saying: "My husband is one of the few people that I get on well with. My dad was the only person who knew how I had been treated in

my adolescence years (my parents are divorced) and who was always on my side.” The student’s answer to another question was interesting as well. When asked who she respected most, she replied it was Margaret Thatcher.

What should be emphasized – this response was one of the few in which these young people declared that they had the role model in life. The overwhelming majority of them (37 people) answered they had no such model. The others stressed their attachment to family (seven respondents said that it was their mother and father that were their role models, one person replied it was only her mother). The remaining five students gave witty and, at the same time, evasive replies, e.g. “Messenger.” It should be pointed out that the majority of Polish students (22 people) had difficulty in naming their role model.

Our last general question concerned young people’s attitude to tradition. The respondents’ answers show clear national divisions: for 23 Azerbaijani students, tradition is of big or very big importance. Only two people gave the negative answer here. One of them added that tradition based on religion imposes limitations on his development opportunities. He talked about social problems generated by religion, specifically saying that it “makes the society move backwards”, it “confines women to their houses” and “does not make people feel a part of the community.” Polish students, in turn, unanimously stated that “tradition brings no benefit,” “tradition does not let people spread their wings,” “life in line with tradition means the return to Middle Ages,” and that “one should look ahead rather than constantly refer to tradition.”

In the second part of our interviews, we asked the respondents about their general knowledge concerning politics. The aim was to establish the level of trust in politicians and get an overview of young people’s style of thinking about politics. Thus, having asked them about their trust in politicians, we got the confirmation of a general trend of the so-called political distrust in Poland: none of our respondents declared trust in politicians. They were accused of being greedy, deceitful (lying during election campaigns) and showing no interest in their voters after a campaign. This was consistent with the part of the interview which concerned associations with the profession of a politician. The respondents often repeated that a “politician is a person with power and money.” Two people emphasized that people usually choose the job of a politician in order to make a career.

It should be pointed out that the responses concerning the above issues obtained from Polish students significantly differed from those given by young Azerbaijani. The majority, i.e. as many as 15 people, stressed their lack of trust in politicians. The others either trusted politicians (seven people) or used the lack of opinion as an excuse. Let us quote one of the students. He said: “A politician is a symbol of success and a well-managed career. Thus, one should trust politicians, because if they have been able to win so much for themselves, they will also do a lot for others.” In this context, the answers to the question about the qualities that a female politician should have were very interesting. While this question did not raise any controversy among Azerbaijani students (which might be due to the fact that a woman holds the office of vice-president in this country), their Polish colleagues were surprised by the way the question had been formulated. They asserted that a woman in politics should have the same personality traits as a male politician. The Polish participants of the study stressed that both genders are equal

when it comes to doing the job of a politician and that is why women are no different from men in this respect (23 out of 25 answers). The Azerbaijani respondents, in turn, indicated the qualities which distinguish women, such as sensitivity and benevolence. They also expressed a conviction that not every woman is predisposed to the profession of a politicians, because, above all, she has to be... smart (21 people). It was suggested that, actually, every male politician is wise, and women must prove their wisdom if they want to be politicians.

The third section concerned the knowledge of Azerbaijan (we asked this question to the Polish students) and Poland (asked to the Azerbaijani respondents). What is interesting, among 25 participants from Nicolaus Copernicus University, there was not a single one that had visited Azerbaijan before and none of them could speak Azeri. What drew our attention during the talks with Poles was their indifference to Azerbaijan, often verging on ignorance. It was evident in their answers, such as “I don’t know anything about Azerbaijan, except for its geographical location,” “I don’t know where. Asia?” or “unfortunately nothing.” When asked what they know about Azerbaijan, Polish students showed no real interest in this country, its people and culture. One could have an impression that the fact they studied with Azerbaijani citizens did not make any of them take an effort to seek some basic information about the country, its culture and tradition, and its political system, etc. There was only one answer that revealed some knowledge about Azerbaijan – one of the students, a woman, associated it with “oil and wealth” and “Formula One GP.”

In view of the above, it is surprising how much students from Baku know about Poland. As we mentioned before, all of the respondents learned Polish. What is interesting, they did it not because it was an institutional obligation, but because they were motivated by their interest in Poland and liking towards Poles. They often said: “we like Polish people as they are hospitable and smile a lot,” and “the level of education in Poland is very high, and the ability to speak Polish will help us study there. These statements were supported by very pragmatic assumptions, such as: “the knowledge of Polish allows us to study abroad. Poland is a member of the European Union and graduation from a European university opens new opportunities.”

At the same time, it must be stressed that students from Baku perceive Poles as “cheerful and hard-working people” and appreciate Poland’s achievement in the area of state development and culture. Even if we consider their knowledge to be incomplete, we must admit that it is much broader than Polish students’ knowledge of Azerbaijan. There was not a single answer like the Polish respondents’ statements: “I know nothing about Azerbaijan” (19 people) or “I have no information about it” (four people).

CONCLUSIONS

Political knowledge is based on general knowledge. The study we conducted among the selected students at the turn of 2017 and 2018, which concerned political knowledge as an element of the building of relations between the societies of Azerbaijan and Poland, shows no symmetry. First, there is no symmetry as far as basic knowledge of the other side is concerned. While students from Baku show interest both in Poland and Poles, speak the Polish language (sometimes not

fluently, though) and know the most fundamental things about our country, students from Poland have no such knowledge of Azerbaijan, demonstrating no interest whatsoever in their host country, its problems and politics.

Second, there is no symmetry in cultural experience. Students from Nicolaus Copernicus University emphasized gender equality when it comes to performing the role of a politician, but, at the same time, they denied the importance of tradition in social development. This is quite the opposite of what students from Baku said in the interviews. Young Azerbaijanis stressed that there are huge differences between men and women dealing with politics and believed that tradition is an important indicator of cultural identity. It was also easier for them to identify their role model. As a matter of fact, our respondents tend to agree only on issues such as trust in politicians, the importance of family or associations with the profession of a politician. However, the compatibility of answers in this sphere is insufficient to build good social and political relations between Azerbaijan and Poland.

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